

## Possible Art Futures Now

Joshua Decter

One could reasonably argue that painting has already been turned inside-out, and outside-in, in every way imaginable. Painting for the sake of painting; painting against painting; painting as the concept of painting; painting as the ostensible transmitter of the painter's identity; painting as the refusal to communicate (beyond painting); painting as the walking dead (of painting); painting as representation; painting to destroy representation; painting as the critique of painting; painting as meta-painting; painting as a *readymade* to be remade as painting. The Readymade as an episteme not only opened the possibility for us to think of non-art things as art, but also to imagine *art itself as a readymade language* that can be adjusted and remade, including the recursive languages of painting. When Robert Rauschenberg erased Willem de Kooning's drawing in 1953 to produce his own artwork titled *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, he approached the de Kooning as a *readymade artwork*, and then subtracted the de Kooning from itself, unmaking the drawing, and then remaking the drawing as a Rauschenberg *adjusted art readymade* by pushing it into a realm of non-objectivity and de-representation. Did Rauschenberg finish de Kooning's drawing by undoing it? In that gesture, Rauschenberg coyly illuminated the anxieties of artistic influence, offering homage and playful subversion. In that gesture, art history was unmade and remade.

From the first time that I met Amy Sillman in 1990, it was clear that she was on a mission to plumb the depths of painting and drawing, which meant navigating and researching art's various modernist, postmodernist and neomodernist histories. In this process, she has generated complex, weird, and humorous artworks comprising unusual hybrid recombinations of abstraction and (post)representation. Uncomfortably beautiful, Amy's art transmits an ethos of *unfinished finishedness* or *incomplete completeness*, as if she – and her artworks – are reluctant to accept an ending. Indeed, she allegorised such conditions in the 2012 *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, a digital animation in which an iPad drawing program operates as a post-medium medium to produce numerous possible iterations of a painting. When is an artwork finished or unfinished, complete or incomplete? When the artist says so? Or the viewer? Perhaps some artworks are best left *finished in their unfinishedness*, in their *complete incompleteness*.

There is something a touch de Kooningesque about two of Amy's new paintings – *Olerama* and *Puxão* – in her show at *auroras* in São Paulo, as well within several drawings. It is evident that de Kooning pulled apart and disassembled the human form to assemble a post-figurative language of abstraction that nevertheless always contained the ghost traces of a kind of deracinated figuration. In a somewhat similar vein, Amy's paintings and drawings reveal an action of *pulling apart* the human figure/form into its abstracted other and *pulling together* abstractedness into forms that transmit a liminal figuration. *Puxão*, not coincidentally, is the Portuguese word for pull (although it can also be used as a pejorative, to refer to someone as a jerk or idiot). The influential mid-20th Century American painter, Hans Hofmann, spoke of “push and pull” regarding how he orchestrated intersections of color, gesture, and geometric form to build dynamic pictorial space. Amy has her own sort of pushing and pulling happening in her paintings and drawings; a pulling apart into painterly gestural mark making, and at the same time, a pushing together into forms that allude to things in the world.

In Amy's 2019 Artist's Choice project at MoMA, *The Shape of Shape* (which I am tempted to retitle *The Art of Art*), she rethought modernist and contemporary art histories by proposing new aesthetic narratives through the staging of unusual visual correspondences and frictions in relation to shape and line, amplifying interpenetrations between abstraction, representation, and figuration. The works she selected could be understood to comprise a kind of *readymade* language of art. Curation became a tool of visualising, to a certain extent, her own creative process; a subjective archive of influences, an essay comprised of artworks. One could almost imagine the works in the MoMA show appearing as characters in a movie or animation – perhaps even a meta-documentary – that Amy might produce about her own practice. One could also imagine the exhibition being restaged endlessly in different configurations, artworks being added and subtracted, an ongoing reimagining of art's variegated languages. *The Shape of Shape* was also the shape of Amy.

Traditional analogue film and animation are built from a sequencing of still images, an assembling, montaging, cutting together – and putting into motion – of particles of visual information. Within the historical avant-gardes, photography, cinema, and animation were in a continuous dialogue with the image-worlds of painting, drawing and printmaking. This spirit of investigation into artistic hybridisations and cross-pollinations animates Amy's work. The previously mentioned *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting* delivers a humorously self-reflexive exposition of Amy's artistic process, wherein she demonstrates that a painting can be understood as an unfolding temporal event that happens at various speeds, signified through a sequence of formal rearticulations, as if in a fluid state of *completed incompleteness*, or *finished unfinishedness*: painting reconceived through the medium of digital animation as meta-painting.

In large-scale works such as the 2013 *one lump or two* we are presented with what could be described as an archive of drawings-as-paintings/ paintings-as-drawings that operate as distinct works but also as elements of her visual language. Amid these reformulations of her own visual grammar and syntax, we can observe the hand-painted sentence, ‘13 possible futures for a painting’, indicating that these works constitute an evolving vocabulary that is also the operating system for another possible future painting that might appear as a painting, or as an animation about a hypothetical painting that can be considered painting by other means.

Amy's analogue paintings, drawings, prints and hybrids do not feel entirely comfortable in their own skins, as if they are complicating themselves, but in ways that do not alienate us, because there is always sufficient humour and formal beauty. In the *finished unfinishedness* or *incomplete completeness* of her art, Amy generously opens a space for us to imagine what it is like to be an artist experimenting with what could be described as a *creolisation* of languages of abstraction and representation. Her vibrant new paintings pop with colour and motion, and we sense that she is continuously rethinking the complex interrelationships between line, shape, figuration, de-figuration, abstraction, de-abstraction, representation, and de-representation.

As evident in *one lump or two*, as well as in *The ALL-OVER* (2016), *Landline* (2018) and her contribution to the 2022 Venice Biennale, Amy has developed installation methods that illuminate her artistic processes, at once constructing and deconstructing how drawings, paintings and prints come into being, and un-being. She mediates drawing through painting, and painting through drawing, printmaking through drawing, painting through printmaking.

Her UV-printed aluminium panels – collectively titled *Temporary Object* – are at once object-like, print-like, drawing-like, and painting-like, and yet these categories and designations seem insufficient to describe what is going on inside of each of these panels, and in the relationships between the panels. The panels are at once cold and hot, raw and cooked, digital and analogue, human and posthuman, embodied and disembodied, improvised and programmed, and dryly humorous. They also constitute an archive and an index of Amy's hybrid visual grammar and syntax. Operating at different velocities – at once fast and slow – they can also be thought of as various possible futures of other artworks. Several panels suggest a compressed mashup of drawing, printmaking, and video effects, perhaps even a sort of deracinated post-television aesthetics.

With *Temporary Object*, Amy invites us into her processes of constructing and unbuilding a visual grammar and syntax, and she also takes another step, asking us to think about how we define what an artwork is. I am alluding to the relationship between the support shelf and the UV printed aluminum panels displayed on that support. The shelf can be defined as

both not-art and art, in the sense that it is an infrastructure that behaves like a para-sculpture, while also invoking a para-architectural condition. In other words, the shelf is art-adjacent. Of course, we understand that throughout history artists have rethought the relation between pedestal/support and sculpture/object, for example, as when Brancusi unified the pedestal and the object, as did Duchamp. Mischievously, I also think of Haim Steinbach's sculptures wherein the distinction between support shelf and displayed objects was cleverly conflated. Perhaps another way to think about *Temporary Object* is as Amy's *Boîte-en-valise*, in the sense that it constitutes an infinitely expandable project that also operates as an *archivesque* display of artworks— perhaps even as a coy gesture of self-curation.

And now Amy is showing in Brazil. Maybe it was always meant to be. A smart, committed, driven, quirky, resilient, entertainingly anxious New York artist does a show in Sao Paulo, the New York of Brazil. One might say that Amy and her art belong in the frenetic modernist and neomodernist urbanism of Sao Paulo— a city of hardworking people. Likewise, Amy never seems to stop working, and her artworks transmit the visual and material energies of nonstop aesthetic labor. One might say that there is an urbanistic energy in Amy's work: a *sensuous traffic* of forms, anti-forms, lines, marks, erasures, layerings, movements, arrested motions, and other sensations. There is a consonance between Amy's historical consciousness about modernism and its subsequent iterations, mutations and self-critiques, and the various trajectories of modernist abstraction that emerged in Brazil during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as with the Neo-Concrete artists who broke free from the strictures of orthodox geometric abstraction. When imagining Amy's work within the Brazilian context, an artist came to mind: Mira Schendel. Although I am not claiming any direct formal correlation between their work, they do share an ethos of experimentation. Like Amy, Schendel was an individualist who did not follow the crowd— an artist who defied parochial boundaries between drawing, painting, and sculpture to forge an idiosyncratic, transmedia practice. This is analogous to the thinking that animates the *Temporary Object* project. Within the context of *auroras*, Amy has deployed the shelf element of *Temporary Object* in a way that responds to – and subtly intervenes with – the architectural conditions of the house. The work transits across a white-walled modernist space and into a room with bookshelves, even obscuring parts of the displayed art publications in a playfully irreverent gesture.

There has always been an anxiety that animates Amy's work – perhaps it is the anxiety of making art in the face of art's post-historical condition (all art is also art history). Her aesthetic is at once messy and organised, conceptual and intuitive; a dialectic of structure and anti-structure, of legibility and the enigmatic. Artmaking is an act of vulnerability, performed in public. Some artists reveal their vulnerability more than others. For an

artist to share their vulnerability as an artist can be awkward, particularly if there is a questioning of *mastery* in relation to how one delivers the work of art into the public sphere. Amy has mastered *unmastery*, systematising improvisation and spontaneity, playing with excess and control. Anti-method as method. Amy's nonstop energy is transferred into her work, and then into us. Her work suggests an obsessiveness that is wryly cognisant of its obsessiveness. She gives us shapeshifting on formal and epistemological terms. It's as if a body has become entangled with its own disembodiment; a body becoming alienated from itself, an *unfinished body*. A disembodied tit can even be spied in some of the *Temporary Object* panels. Could we understand this shapeshifting – a fluidity of forms suggestive of transition from one state to another – as an expression of an aesthetics of queerness? Perhaps. The visual ambiguities that characterise Amy's work ultimately evince an uneasy gorgeousness.

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(This is a revised version of Decter's essay "Uncomfortable Beauty," published on the occasion of Sillman's 2023 "Temporary Object" exhibition at the Thomas Dane Gallery in Naples, Italy)